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Woody Allen

Among the most prolific directors in American cinema since his debut with *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* (1966), Woody Allen's work has spanned the eras, his style evolving from the broad comic leanings of films such as *Bananas* (1971) and *Sleeper* (1973) to elegiac rom-coms the like of *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Manhattan* (1979) to even the stark drama of *Another Woman* (1988) and *Crimes and Misdemeanours* (1989).

Throughout the evolution of his career, though, one element of

Allen's approach has long remained consistent: his playful sense of reflexivity, a quality Robert Stam defines in filmic terms as "the process by which films foreground their own production... their authorship... their textual procedures... their intertextual influences... or their reception" (151). Allen is an artist obsessed with the machinations of his medium, given to the implementation of various narrative and stylistic abstractions in pursuit of a probing examination of the possibilities of cinema. Postmodern tendencies form an essential backbone of his work, his

keenness to expose the façade of filmmaking together with his multifarious intertextual references making his a cinema indelibly linked to wider cultural contexts. This essay focuses particularly upon Allen's recurring use of self-reflexion, examining in detail the manner in which his own artistry has found metatextual representation in artist protagonists whose careers seem closely to mirror his own. Most prominently in *Stardust Memories* (1980) and *Deconstructing Harry* (1997), Allen has used his films as authorial theses, employing them as critiques and analyses of his

own purpose and potential as an artist. Through close consideration of his methodologies and intentions in these films, a distinct portrait of Allen's relationship to his own career emerges; in cautious study of the self-aware representations of authorship herein contained, we can arrive at an understanding of the director's prominent conceptions of self.

Still from Deconstructing Harry

Before any discussion of Allen's self-representation can be broached, it is important to note that the reading of *Stardust Memories* and *Deconstructing*

Harry's protagonists—Sandy Bates and Harry Block, respectively, both portrayed by Allen himself—as ciphers for the director is not one shared by all of Allen's critics. In consideration of the former, Lewis is particularly vocal in his opposition, opining that "[c]ritics have been too quick to see Bates's problem as a thinly disguised recreation of Allen's own dilemma as an artist, an exercise in perverse, self-punishing narcissicism" (144). In Lewis' view, Allen is in these films reflecting not his own cinema, but cinema at large; his employment of directors as protagonists serves to dissect

the role of film to humanity in general, rather than simply to his life alone. Indeed, Allen himself has traditionally dismissed the interpretation of any such representational role in his characters, denying these suggestions of conscious self-reflexion. Nevertheless, as Girgus notes, “[i]n most of Allen’s films, the exterior author exists in relationship to the interior narrator” (29): it is difficult—impossible even, perhaps—to separate creator from created, author from text. The extent of Allen’s postmodernism, I believe, precludes the assessment of his

characters' profound similarities to the director himself as mere coincidence; if nothing else, he consciously foregrounds his own authorship (in conjunction with Stam's aforementioned definition) as a means of thematic expatiation, using the template of his career as a springboard from which to assess the role of the director, of cinema, of art at large.

Still from *Stardust Memories*

Arguably the clearest indicator of Allen's persistent concern with the idea of authorship comes with *Stardust Memories*. While the influence of Fellini was already

abundantly apparent in his work, openly acknowledged and parodied in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* (*But Were Afraid to Ask)* (1972), here it is essential to an appreciation of the film's themes. So closely paralleling Fellini's *8½* (1963) that the "narcissistic meditation" attracted scathing denunciation as simply "a rip-off" (Cardullo 305), *Stardust Memories* plays on Fellini's film's celebrated stature as a masterpiece of metatextuality, the similarities thereto of the film's own aesthetic as well as that of the film-within-a-film inviting consideration of Sandy Bates

alongside Fellini and Allen both. Chronicling Bates' extended crisis of confidence as he finds himself conflicted between the desire to produce works of greater profundity and to meet his audience's demand to replicate the "earlier, funnier movies," *Stardust Memories* examines at its heart the obligations of the artist, fixating firmly on the dichotomies between entertainment and enlightenment, fantasy and reality, comedy and drama. Between the dual successes of *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan*, Allen made *Interiors* (1978), his first fully dramatic film, poised in sharp contrast to the

crowd-pleasing comedy of those larger hits; its failure, combined with Allen's infamous disregard for its neighbours in his oeuvre, appear to have provoked complex ruminations on his apparent inability to simultaneously induce laughter and thought. In the opinion of D'Aquino, *Stardust Memories* "seems to address the important issue of a culture that, instead of helping people to gain a realistic understanding of the world, chooses denial and escapism" (565). Its self-reflexion arises in Allen's grappling with this difficult dichotomy, in his struggle throughout the film to convey

through the lightness of humour the deeper topics his strictly dramatic work directly tackles. As Bates efforts endlessly to relate *his* film to the common man, gradually assembling dramatic constructions yet greater, so too does Allen strive to marry his popular comic sensibilities and his overpowering desire to contribute positively to cinema's treatment of the human condition. At the end of the film, notes Lewis, "we see [Bates] regaining his appreciation of humor not as an answer to philosophic questions but as a desirable experience" (147). He has reached the conclusion that, although it

may not provide an answer to the great mysteries of existence, comedy offers some small relief from the burden of being, and that the provision of this is as valid a course in life as is the exploration of those questions. Given that the next film Allen would make—*A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* (1982), in essence an exercise in sheer silly raunchiness—began a spate of confident comic offerings, the argument for Bates as Allen's cipher seems no longer so unreasonable, the former's coming to terms with his role within cinema seemingly matched by the latter. As D'Aquino summates: "Woody

Allen's happy ending, where life becomes fiction, or vice versa, may be one of the strongest statements about the impact that art can have on life" (574).

Still from Deconstructing Harry

Where the work of Fellini offers the bulk of *Stardust Memories'* intertextual references, with *Deconstructing Harry* Allen's strongest influence is Ingmar Bergman, already heavily present in many of the director's other works, among them *Interiors* and *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*. Its strongest shades of Bergman come in the form of its structure,

borrowed from *Wild Strawberries* (1957), and in the surname of its protagonist, a tip of the hat toward Antonius Block, the hero of Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957). Again, this depth of reference to the work of another cinema artist foregrounds the concept of the author, adding yet another layer to a film heavily concerned with metatext; per Girgus "Allen challenges most of our conventional notions of authorship" (20). *Deconstructing Harry* sees the eponymous novelist journey to his alma mater in order to receive an honorary degree; along the way we see enacted

cutaway scenes from his many stories, and the interactions he has with those whose lives his own characters are based upon. Unlike *Stardust Memories*, which concerned itself with the responsibilities of authorship, *Deconstructing Harry* addresses its perils: it “allows Mr. Allen to expand on a thought raised less directly in *Bullets Over Broadway*: that the person ruled by creative imagination may be indifferent, not to say ruinous, to the happiness of those around him” (Maslin). Much as the narrative of *Stardust Memories* appears to have been influenced by the direction of

Allen's career—and indeed to have then influenced it in turn—

Deconstructing Harry's story finds interesting parallels in the wider context of Allen's contemporary life, released as it was at a time when the director's romantic escapades occupied far more column inches than did the content of his work. The film functions first and foremost as an amusing yet wearied treatise on the notion of autobiography, on the idea that an author's work *must* be seen as the product of his own personal life.

Block's relationships are fraught with conflict, family and friends all taking issue with their

representation in his fiction, despite his insistence that his characters are entirely separate entities. It's difficult not to relate such content to the predominant discourse surrounding *Stardust Memories*—not to mention *Husbands and Wives* (1992), which chronicled the demise of a relationship contemporaneously with that of Allen and Mia Farrow's—Allen's frustrations with the incessant reading of his works in the context of his career now extended to his personal life. As such, the unusual vileness and despicability of *Deconstructing Harry's* "Allen role" seems to mirror

not the reality of the director's life, but rather the prevailing media image thereof, parodying that caricature with blackly comic subversion. Block is a character so loathsome, so pitiful, so pathetic, that he precludes categorisation as another of Allen's "indulgent" self-images, as they have been categorised by his detractors: "Harry Block's character intercedes between Allen and such critics by conceding their argument about Allen, redirecting their attention toward Allen's fictional creation, and then instigating another discussion about the meaning and value of the film itself" (Girgus

153). By demonising the character he plays himself, Allen extenuates to a fallacious extent this sense of self-reflexion, crafting an image of the author more attuned to his perception by the media than by any rational actuality. In doing so, he invites consideration of the folly of such close analysis, emphasising the distance that must be maintained between conceptions of character and of creator.

The penchant for reflexivity must be seen as symptomatic not only of the general language-consciousness of contemporary thought but also of what one might call its methodological self-

awareness, its tendency to scrutinize its own instruments. (Stam 151).

Across almost five decades of film direction, Allen has arrived at a distinct characteristic formula of thematic concern and stylistic delivery that defines and makes instantly recognisable his work as almost a genre unto itself. Few aspects are more important in the construction thereof than is his postmodernism; Allen's unwavering commitment to the analysis not just of his subject matter, but also of the very construction of his films from within their own narrative borders renders him a fastidiously

metatextual storyteller. From his struggle to understand and accept the potentialities and limitations of his tonal register with *Stardust Memories* to his more caustic rejection of intertwining author and text to uncomfortably personal levels in *Deconstructing Harry*, he has throughout his filmography conducted an extensive examination into the role of the filmmaker and the relationship of artist to art, building on the templates bequeathed by Fellini and Bergman to further define the tenets of cinematic authorship. Continuing still to obsess over these issues into the new

millennium—the interesting but deeply troubled *Hollywood Ending* (2002) brings literal manifestation to the idea of losing sight of one's work, a valid concern given the film's comparative failings—Allen's probing insights into the struggles of filmic artistry continue to be “instrumental in understanding the difficulties faced by the artist in his journey toward self-awareness within an overall cultural framework” (D'Aquino 575). Never content to remain the slapstick clown of *Bananas* and *Sleeper*, the self-conscious schlub of *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan*, the brooding existentialist of *Husbands and*

Wives and Crimes and Misdemeanours, Allen continues to redefine his screen self in search of the true filmic artist he strives to be, uncovering along the way the frank realities of cinematic construction and the important relationship between an artist and his art, be it amiable or not. As D'Aquino writes,

Good art often has the ability to tap into the subconscious, bringing to light unpleasant truths. Art can therefore be an important instrument for self-analysis. Indeed, fiction can enable the discovery of selfhood. (D'Aquino 558)

